

THE PREVIOUS
ENGAGEMENT

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT
FOR ONE PERSON

Opus 28



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Perennial Wilde



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THE CHARACTER
ULYSSES GRANT HOLLISTER

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THE PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT

In one of his writings Mr. Henry Arthur Jones speaks of the difficulty of avoiding the soliloquy. This comedy is a more or less flippant demonstration of some of the ways in which this may be accomplished.

The living room of a modestly furnished bachelor's apartment in a not too fashionable apartment house. As is customary in such buildings, an interior telephone, communicating with the outside world through the medium of the apartment switchboard, is fastened to the wall. And the occupant, rather extravagantly, has had a direct line telephone installed besides, and this instrument rests on a table.

At the rear, a door opens on a hallway. At the right, another door opens into the bedroom. A third door, at the left, leads into a kitchenette, an excessively diminutive room almost entirely filled by the range. Next to the door of the kitchenette is the opening of the dumb-waiter, which, at intervals, can be heard making noisy trips up and down.

In the main room, a large grandfather's clock, not running, as seen by the stationary pendulum, indicates five o'clock. The bright sunshine through the little window tucked into the left corner, the general quiet of the day, and an occasional sound of church bells in the distance go to show that it is Sunday morning.

There is a pause. The occupant is asleep in his bed-

room, and a raucous snore is audible. Then, without warning, the dumb-waiter rope commences to lash the sides of the shaft vigorously and loudly. The snoring ceases, and the tenant, wearing a flowered dressing gown over a suit of pyjamas, enters from the right.

He is thirty-one or two, and by no means a bad looking chap. And he yawns prodigiously as he pushes his tousled hair out of his eyes and opens the door to the dumb-waiter.

HOLLISTER

All right, all right! I heard you. Send up the things. (*The dumb-waiter rattles, and he produces two eggs and a quart of milk. He inspects the eggs carefully; then returns to the shaft*)

Hello! You there? Are those eggs the biggest you've got? (*A pause*) I don't believe those eggs were ever near a hen! They're humming-bird's eggs, that's what they are! (*He closes the door of the dumb-waiter shaft noisily, and crosses to the rear door, which he opens. Between his door and the door of his neighbor's apartment, is a heap of Sunday newspapers. He selects his own, and, in the act of reëntering his room, pauses to listen to his neighbor's movements*)

George! (*He raps on the door*) Are you up, George? . . . George, you're a pretty good skate, aren't you? . . . Well, have you any idea what's good for the morning after? (*He listens*) Oh, you know I never drink, but last night was different. There was a reason for it. (*He listens again*) No; no wine. Just whiskey. About five times three fingers. That was enough; more than enough! You know I'm not used to it. (*A large collie comes barking down the hall-*

way. *He interrupts his conversation to "shoo" the dog into his room*) Get in there, Buster! . . . What did you say, George? *(He smiles broadly)* Well, to tell the truth, I needed my nerve last night: all the nerve I had, and just a little bit more. That's why I did it. . . . What's that? . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Thanks. You're sure that'll fix me up? . . . Yes? Well, there's no harm in trying it. Thanks, George. *(He reënters the room, closes the door, and goes directly to the interior telephone)*

Hello! Who's at the switchboard? Julius? Well, Julius, go around the corner and get a bottle of ginger ale — domestic ginger ale and two limes. . . . Yes, limes. Send them up on the dumb-waiter. *(He hangs up the receiver, but takes it off again as an afterthought strikes him)* Wait a minute, Julius! What time is it? . . . You don't really mean it! . . . That so? Thanks. *(He hangs up, crosses slowly to the clock, and turns the hands to eleven thirty-five. The clock strikes three. He looks at it in an instant's confusion, then shakes his head, and sinks painfully into a chair. The dog, wagging his tail furiously, rushes to him. The young man takes the dog's head between his hands, and addresses him seriously)*

Buster, I'm a chump! You didn't know that, did you, Buster? *(The dog wags his tail, but gives no other sign of assent)* Well, I am! I didn't have the nerve to propose to a girl last night, even though I knew she'd have me; even though I knew that the moment I said, "Will you marry me?" she'd throw her arms around my neck and nearly strangle me! I got as far as her door, and then — then

I thought of her sitting in there on the sofa, with a sort of expectant look on her face, and the lights low, and — and my knees began to shiver, and I thought I'd better have a drink first. So I *had* the drink — whiskey — plain whiskey, mind you, with nothing intoxicating mixed in it! Then I came back, and I didn't feel a bit better! — not a bit better than before! I didn't have the nerve to propose to a lamp-post! So I had another drink — plain whiskey — and it didn't seem to help; so I took another; and another; and still another — quite a flock of drinks — until I began to lose count. (*He pauses tragically*)

Well, you know I'm not used to drinking, Buster, and after half an hour of it I had enough nerve to propose to the Queen of England! So I marched out, head up in the air, shoulders thrown back, and I was going to ask her to marry me, just like that! Not the Queen of England: the girl, you know. I remember that very well. But when I wanted to find her door again, I couldn't! I couldn't find her door, Buster! And it's really not a very hard door to find! (*He smiles reminiscently*)

That's about the last thing I remember, Buster. I stood there in the street, and I reasoned the thing out for myself. I decided she must have moved — must have moved right after I took that second drink. I remember I said to myself "This is so sudden!" you know, her moving like that. (*He pauses, and raises his hands to his head with a groan*) Buster, it's all a blank after that! — all a blank! I might have murdered somebody on the way home

— I don't know. I had nerve enough to do anything. I was full of nerve! Proposing would have been a cinch! But I couldn't find the girl! I couldn't find the girl! (*The dumb-waiter rope rattles. He goes to it, appearing an instant later with the ginger ale, which he proceeds to pour into a glass, and the limes, which he crushes into it. He drinks it slowly*)

Awful stuff, Buster; awful. But it's good for Daddy. Here's to her! (*He tosses off what is left in the glass, and searches among a large number of photographs which decorate the center table*)

This is her picture, Buster. Buster, this is Miss Edmunds. Grace, this is Buster. (*He shakes the dog's paw gravely*) Grace Edmunds — isn't that a pretty name? But Grace Edmunds Hollister is prettier, isn't it? If I ever have the nerve to ask her!

[*From some nearby apartment come the strains of the "Toreador Song," atrociously rendered on a broken-winded phonograph. He listens, humming the air, but suddenly breaks off to bring his fist into his palm with a resounding thump.*

Say, Buster! (*He disappears into the next room, returning in an instant with an old-fashioned cylindrical-record phonograph*) First aid to cowards, Buster! (*He sits at the table and writes hurriedly*) Buster, how do you spell "tendency?" With an "a" or with an "e"? (*He smiles*) But it really doesn't matter, does it? (*He reads over what he has written, sets the phonograph going, clears his throat impressively, and speaks into the horn*)

Grace — may I call you Miss Edmunds? No! You know what I mean: Miss Edmunds — may I call

you Grace? I am thirty-one years old, high-school education, perfectly healthy, except for a tendency to water on the knee; I have a good position, good prospects, no relatives living, can support a wife, belong to the Baptist Church, and l o v e you! Will you marry me? Respectfully yours, Ulysses Grant Hollister. (*Stopping the phonograph*) How's that, Buster? (*He resets the instrument: starts it going again*)

THE PHONOGRAPH

A-hem! A-hem!

HOLLISTER (*interrupting*)

I never said that!

THE PHONOGRAPH

Grace — may I call you Miss Edmunds? No! You know what I mean: Miss Edmunds, may I call you Grace? I am thirty-one years old, high-school education, perfectly healthy, except for a tendency to water on the knee; I have a good position, good prospects, no relatives living, can support a wife, belong to the Baptist Church, and l o v e you! Will you marry me? Respectfully yours, Ulysses Grant Hollister. How's that, Buster?

HOLLISTER

Fine! (*He allows the machine to run a few seconds longer. Then, very expressively*) Thank you, dearest! I knew you would! (*He stops the phonograph, fastens on the wooden top, and goes to the interior telephone*) Hello! Hello! . . . Julius, I'm sending a phonograph down on the dumb-waiter. . . . What? . . . A phonograph: a talking machine. I want you to take it right around to Miss Edmunds. . . . Yes; of course

you know where she lives: I've sent you there before. . . . Give it to Miss Edmunds herself: nobody else will do, and tell her to play the record right away. . . . Yes, the moment she gets it. What? . . . Does she like music? (*smiling happily*) Well, she'll like *this* selection! . . . No; it's not grand opera: it's something better. Live and learn, Julius; live and learn. (*An afterthought*) I'm sending down half a dollar for you, Julius. Keep it. (*He hangs up, waltzes gaily to the table with the phonograph, and deposits it on the dumb-waiter*) Don't drop it, Julius! (*He sits, and takes the dog's head between his knees*)

Were you ever in love, Buster? Well, try it! It's great! (*He pauses*) Julius is just starting now. (*He walks the length of the room twice, very deliberately*) Now he's reached her door. (*In dumb show, he times Julius' movements. He climbs imaginary steps; rings an imaginary doorbell; waits; shifts an imaginary phonograph from one hand to another; rings the bell again. Finally the imaginary door is opened. He explains his errand to the maid; declines to give her the phonograph; will give it to Miss Edmunds personally; waits in anticipation. Enter Miss Edmunds. He bows and scrapes; delivers the imaginary phonograph and message; grins; exits, descending the imaginary flight of steps after closing the imaginary door*)

Now she's got it! (*A pause, accompanied with suitable dumb show*) She's playing it! Will she say "Yes?" (*He leans over and picks objects from the dog's pelt*) She loves me; she loves me not; she loves me; she loves me not; she loves — (*breaking off*) This

would take too long, Buster. (*He takes up the photograph*) Allow me to introduce the future Mrs. Hollister! (*He waits at the telephone*) Getting impatient, boy? Well, so am I! Now, all together! One! Two! Three!

(*The interior telephone rings sharply*) Ah! (*He takes down the receiver*) Hello! Julius not back yet? No? . . . Well, what do you want? (*He turns to the dog*) A lady to speak to me? Who is it? .. Eh? I expect it? She says I expect the call? Put her on. (*He does a war-dance at the receiver*)

Hello! . . . Yes, right here, dearest. . . . Dearest! . . . What? . . . You were surprised? Well, I don't wonder! Most any girl would have been surprised under the circumstances! . . . You must have thought I was crazy! . . . Ha! Ha! You did? . . . (*In immense surprise*) What? . . . What? You—you thought I had been *drinking*? How could you tell? (*Utterly bewildered*) Oh, of course I remember, but tell me about it again. . . . Yes, I like to hear it. . . . Eh? . . . I dashed into your house—dashed into your house *last night*? . . . Yes, I hear you quite plainly. . . . I asked you to marry me? . . . I kissed you twice? . . . Certainly! I wouldn't forget *that*! How could I? . . . And then? . . . I gave you a ring and I rushed out again? . . . Well, I'm jiggered! (*He turns to the dog*) Buster, she accepted me last night, and I didn't know it! (*Turning again to the telephone*) Yes, dearest? . . . Oh, I can't tell you how much! . . . More than that! . . . Oh, much more than that! Why, I love you more than . . . (*The second tele-*

phone rings) I love you more than . . . (*The telephone continues to ring*) Just hold the wire a minute! (*He takes up the second telephone*)

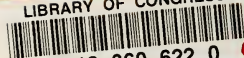
Hello! What? Who is this? (*Thunderstruck*) Grace? But it can't be Grace! . . . What? . . . (*With sudden coolness*) All right, I won't call you by your first name if you don't want me to. . . . Yes, I sent it. I sent the phonograph. . . . No: no: it *wasn't* a fool thing to do. . . . (*Emphatically*) I say it *wasn't* a fool thing to do! . . . What? You were never so humiliated in your life? What do you mean? . . . (*After a ghastly pause*) Well, how was I to know that you would set the darned thing going before a roomful of people? (*Indignantly*) I thought you'd have more sense than that! . . . (*Interrupting*) I'm not impertinent! . . . But look here, Grace . . . yes, Miss Edmunds . . . I'm listening: yes, listening. . . . What? . . . to *me*? . . . (*With sudden craftiness*) If I don't apologize — apologize *humbly* you'll never speak to me again as long as you live? (*Looking at the other telephone*) Hold the wire! . . . Just hold the wire a minute! (*He rises, takes up the collection of photographs, and deposits one next to the telephone over which Grace has been talking. He approaches the other telephone, and examines the remaining photographs. He is absolutely unable to select the proper one. He hesitates: the uncertainty is awful. Then, resolutely, he takes up the first receiver*)

Hello! . . . Yes, dearest. Only a business call. . . . No, not important, but it's a nuisance, isn't it? (*He listens*) Oh, I can't begin to tell you! . . . I

love everything about you! Your eyes! Your lips! Your hair! (*With trepidation*) Even — even your name! . . . Yes, I love it! (*Violently agitated*) Let me hear you say it yourself! . . . Yes. . . . What? . . . Oh, it's a whim of mine, but I love to hear you say it! . . . Yes? . . . (*He listens with fearful anxiety. Then, with sudden and overwhelming relief, surprise, joy:*) E t h e l ! (*In the wildest of raptures*) That's the best news I've heard in many a day! . . . Oh, don't mind what I'm saying. I'm excited. . . . Listen: listen, Ethel darling: I'll be over in five minutes! . . . You'll be ready? . . . Fine! Goodby, d e a r e s t ! (*He hangs up, rises, selects one of the photographs in his hand with obvious satisfaction. The others he throws away contemptuously. His eye lights on the other telephone. He grins; takes up Grace's picture; compares it with Ethel's to Grace's obvious disadvantage. Then, in the most leisurely manner, he seats himself at Grace's telephone*) Hello! Miss Edmunds? . . . You're waiting for me to apologize? . . . Well, I *do* apologize. I apologize most humbly. I made a mistake. . . . (*There is an appreciable pause*) No; not to-day. . . . nor to-morrow . . . nor the next day. You see, I'm dated up for some time to come.
[*He pitches her picture into the wastebasket.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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